

{My Madison}

Semester in London's 30 years of exploration

By HARRY ATWOOD ('87)

In 1979 there was no such thing as a Study Abroad program at JMU. And then Semester in London happened. Today JMU's Office of International Programs, under Lee Sternberger's direction, boasts a veritable fleet of international programs, sending nearly a thousand students all across the globe each year to some 95 nations — from England to Vietnam; from Ghana to Peru; from Qatar to Malta.

These many programs grew directly out of the groundwork laid 30 years ago by certain JMU pioneers (Semester in London founder and former JMU English professor Ralph Cohen, and then-President Ronald E. Carrier, chief amongst them). Launching a Study Abroad program from scratch was no small feat back when such programs were rarities. Even Cohen had his doubts. "I was actually scared that winter before I led that first group," he admits. That uncertainty is important to remember because it took some guts to forge ahead. Doing something new is often risky. But taking risks can pay great dividends. Semester in London is proof that the adventurous are often rewarded greatly.

Some of those adventurers (directors, professors, alumni, administrators, friends and benefactors) were in attendance at the Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Staunton this past November to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the London program.

The reunion kicked off with a reception in a handsome dining hall with silver trays of hors d'oeuvres being ferried about by waiters. Students, from as far back as the pioneering '79 group, greeted old travel companions, swapped stories, reconnected with former teachers and flipped through photo albums (some more yellowed than others). The crowd attended a performance of *Henry the IV Part I* at the Blackfriars Theater. After the performance, Sternberger offered thank yous to Ralph and Judy Cohen, and presented gifts to all four Semester in London directors (Cohen, Doug Kehlenbrink, Charlie Turner and Rusty Greene) who have so ably guided the program for a momentous 30 years.

During the celebration, I asked a number of former participants what made Semester in London the experience they so cherished.

About the Author *Perhaps of all people associated with the Semester in London Program, Harry Atwood ('87) can lay claim to having experienced and witnessed more than anyone else the magic of JMU's Study Abroad experience. He first took part in a May session in 1985 and later as a member of the spring 1986 group. Three years later, he and his wife, Robin, took the job of running Madison House (JMU's second London home). They stayed for 10 years.*



(Above): Lee Sternberger, on stage at the Blackfriars Theater, toasts Semester in London alumni and reunion revelers at the 30th anniversary of the inaugural JMU Study Abroad program. (Right): Harry Atwood ('87) ran JMU's London home, Madison House, with his wife Robin ('87, '89M). For 10 years they witnessed the transformative magic of Study Abroad.



JMU international programs staff members Lee Sternberger and Judy Cohen with Semester in London directors Rusty Greene, Ralph Cohen, Charlie Turner and Doug Kehlenbrink.

The answers varied, but it all seemed to come down to the simple idea of "relocating" oneself. By leaving the comforts of the JMU campus and choosing to live in the heart of one of the world's great cities, students found they had opened a door to a banquet of experiences.

As any serious traveler will tell you, "relocating" yourself brings you into frequent contact with the unknown and unfamiliar. That's practically the definition of education — to seek,

engage and learn from things new to us. The unknown and unfamiliar are offered copiously in cities like London, Florence, Salamanca or Antwerp (to name the four jewels in the JMU Study Abroad crown).

The difference between being a tourist and being a student abroad is an important distinction, too. Kehlenbrink insists that London is a perfect laboratory for learning. "There's an aspect of co-discovery," he says. "The joy for me was to watch students turn corners that I didn't turn down. It's a delight as a teacher when a new experience is in front of you all the time."

As longtime observers of this magic, my wife, Robin ('87, '89M), and I witnessed hundreds of students undergo fundamental changes in how they viewed and carried themselves and how they squared their new experiences with previously held beliefs. The kids who lugged their suitcases into Madison House at the beginning of each term were not the same kids who lugged them back out the door three months later. "I loved watching students transform from American citizens to citizens of the world over the course of a semester," Robin says.

In the end, the value of Study Abroad cannot be quantified. The closest I can come to defining its magic is embodied in the notion that the unexpected things in life are often the most meaningful.

* Learn more about JMU Study Abroad at www.jmu.edu/international/abroad/.